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Held at Headquarters, New York,
on Monday, 13 May 1991, at 10.30 a.m.

President: Mr. DJOUDI (Algeria)

CONTENTS

Expression of condolences to the people of Bangladesh

Adoption of the agenda and other organizational matters

Statements by the Under-Secretary-General for International Economic and Social Affairs and by the Director-General of the United Nations Office at Vienna

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The meeting was called to order at 10.55 a.m.

EXPRESSION OF CONDOLENCES TO THE PEOPLE OF BANGLADESH

The PRESIDENT conveyed to the people of Bangladesh the condolences of the Economic and Social Council for the terrible natural disaster that had just befallen the country. The Council expressed its solidarity with the people of Bangladesh and invited all members of the international community to give practical demonstrations of that solidarity.

Mrs. JAHAN (Observer for Bangladesh) voiced her appreciation for the unanimous show of solidarity and support given to her country when tragedy had struck. The tragedy had been responsible for more than 100,000 deaths, had left countless numbers without homes, and had affected almost 10 million people. Bangladesh was mobilizing its resources to face that terrible situation, but because of its many limitations it could not do so alone, and needed support and understanding. Her Prime Minister had appealed to the international community, and the Secretary-General of the United Nations had himself made a welcome appeal for assistance to Bangladesh. The response had come from all sides and from different sources: States, governments, United Nations agencies, non-governmental organizations, students, ordinary men and women. To all, she expressed her country's thanks.

ADOPTION OF THE AGENDA AND OTHER ORGANIZATIONAL MATTERS (E/1991/30, 73-74; E/1991/L.14/Rev.1, L.15)

The PRESIDENT invited the Council to consider the provisional agenda for the first regular session, as approved by the Council in decision 1991/202 B and set out in document E/1991/30. He drew the Council's attention to decision 1991/212 of 25 March 1991, in which it had been decided to include in the provisional agenda for the first regular session an item entitled "Emergency assistance to Somalia". He suggested that the item should become agenda item 12 and that the item following it should be renumbered accordingly. He suggested, consequently, that the question of emergency

(The President)

assistance to Somalia should be removed from the list of questions to be considered by the Council under agenda item 1, "Adoption of the agenda and other organizational matters". If he heard no objection, he would take it that the Council wished to adopt the agenda contained in document E/1991/30, with the inclusion of the new item 12 entitled "Emergency assistance to Somalia", and to eliminate that question from those to be considered under agenda item 1.

It was so decided.

Mrs. WARZAZI (Morocco) proposed that subitem (a) (Statistics) under agenda item 5 (Statistical and cartographic questions) should not be considered during the Council's first regular session, but rather be taken up at the second regular session to be held in Geneva. She also requested that the subitem should be included under the agenda item "Development and international economic cooperation", which would be considered at the second regular session.

The purpose of the change was to organize the work of the Council more rationally, by considering all the social questions together. Also, without that change, her delegation would not, in view of the heavy schedule of work for the first regular session, be able to contribute as it would like to the discussion of the statistical questions.

Mr. AHMED (Under-Secretary-General for International Economic and Social Affairs) said that the proposal of the representative of Morocco would, if the Council approved it, have financial implications, since some Secretariat officials would have to be sent to Geneva when the Council's second regular session was held.

Mr. WALDROP (United States of America) said that he had listened with great interest to the proposal by the Moroccan delegation. However, before the Council decided the matter, it should have a statement from the Secretariat on the financial implications of such a decision.

The PRESIDENT said that the Council would therefore await information on the financial implications of the proposal of Morocco before taking a decision on the matter. He next invited the Council to consider the

(The President)

note by the Secretariat on the organization of work of the session (E/1991/L.15), in particular the annex containing the proposed schedule of work for the session. He also drew the Council's attention to the note by the Secretariat on the status of documentation for the session (E/1991/L.14/Rev.1). Naturally, the organization of the Council's work would have to be amended to take into account the inclusion of the new agenda item 12 on emergency assistance to Somalia.

Mr. STOBY (Secretary of the Council), said in connection with the new agenda item 12 on emergency assistance to Somalia that the Secretary-General had sent a mission to Somalia to study the situation in that country. The mission would submit a report to the Secretary-General, which would be transmitted to the Council. He therefore suggested that the Council should consider the new item on Thursday, 23 May 1991.

Mr. DUHS (Sweden) proposed that the plenary meeting of the Council scheduled to be held on the morning of Friday, 24 May 1991, should be held on the morning of Wednesday, 22 May 1991.

The PRESIDENT said that, if he heard no objection, he would take it that the Council wished to adopt the proposals concerning the organization of work contained in document E/1991/L.15, taking into account the revisions proposed.

It was so decided.

The PRESIDENT reminded the members of the Council of the practice followed in recent years. The meetings of the Council and of its Second (Social) Committee should begin promptly at 10 a.m. and 3 p.m. With regard to the length of statements, a maximum time-limit of 15 minutes would be set for statements under clustered items (items 5, 8 and 9) and 10 minutes for statements under other agenda items. It was further proposed that a 15-minute time-limit should be set for statements under items 6 and 7, which had been grouped together for the purpose of discussion. Concerning statements in exercise of the right of reply, it was suggested, bearing in mind the provisions of rule 46 of the rules of procedure of the Council, that delegations should exercise their right of reply at the end of the day

(The President)

whenever two meetings had been scheduled on the same day for the consideration of the same item, and that no delegation should make more than two statements per item at a given meeting, with the first intervention limited to five minutes and the second to three minutes. If he heard no objections, he would take it that the Council wished to adopt those provisions for the current session.

It was so decided.

The PRESIDENT invited the Council to consider requests from non-governmental organizations in category I consultative status, for hearings by the Council or its sessional committees in connection with items on the Council's agenda. Pursuant to Council resolution 1296 (XLIV) and in accordance with rule 84 of its rules of procedure, the Committee on Non-Governmental Organizations had met in the afternoon of Friday, 19 May, to review those requests. The report of the Committee had been issued as document E/1991/73. He would take it, if he heard no objection, that the Council decided to hear the non-governmental organizations listed in paragraph 2 of the Committee's report under the agenda items indicated.

It was so decided.

Mr. STOBY (Secretary of the Council) said that the Commission on Transnational Corporations had held its seventeenth session from 10 to 19 April 1991. However, the Commission had not been able to complete all of its work in the time allotted to it. Accordingly, it had requested the Council to approve the holding of an additional meeting of the Commission. Such approval was necessary since the Council had adopted rules preventing its subsidiary bodies from meeting during Council sessions and requiring such bodies to complete their work eight weeks before the Council session at which the reports were to be considered; in the case under consideration, that would be the second regular session.

The PRESIDENT said that, if he heard no objection, he would take it that the Council agreed that the Commission on Transnational Corporations should hold an additional meeting on Wednesday, 15 May 1991, in order to conclude the work relating to its seventeenth session.

It was so decided.

STATEMENTS BY THE UNDER-SECRETARY-GENERAL FOR INTERNATIONAL ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL AFFAIRS AND THE DIRECTOR-GENERAL OF THE UNITED NATIONS OFFICE AT VIENNA

Mr. AHMED (Under-Secretary-General for International Economic and Social Affairs) said that he welcomed the consensus reached by the General Assembly during its resumed forty-fifth session that the United Nations should have an integrated approach in the social and economic field. The Department of International Economic and Social Affairs would do its utmost to assist the Council in its efforts to strengthen and revitalize the work of the United Nations in the economic and social sectors.

In 1991, the world economy would experience very slow growth and the level of per capita output would fall for the second consecutive year. The Gulf crisis had reinforced recessionary tendencies which had already been apparent in many parts of the world economy by mid-1990. Another major obstacle to growth had been the deep decline in output in Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union as a result of the increasing difficulties encountered by those countries in the transition to a market economy.

While there were some expectations of a modest economic recovery in 1991, the possibility of a global recession could not be completely ruled out. Those adverse trends in the world economy were severely affecting the social situation of a large number of countries, particularly in Africa and Latin America.

The recent outbreak of cholera in Latin America was a tragic example of the effects of the critical economic situation. By mid-April, the World Health Organization (WHO) had received reports of more than 177,000 new cases of cholera in 12 countries. WHO estimated that in Latin America alone between 90 million and 120 million people were currently at risk of contracting the disease. The epidemic was the worst visible symptom of much greater health problems caused by poverty. Recent estimates indicated that there were 1 billion people living in unacceptable conditions of poverty and approximately 600 million living in conditions of extreme poverty.

The recent Gulf crisis had forced many inhabitants of the region to leave their homes. Hundreds of thousands of migrant workers had been forced to return to their countries, which were often unable to reabsorb them into their

economies. On the contrary, many of those countries had relied heavily on the remittances of migrant workers and were suffering severe economic hardships.

In order to reverse those trends it was necessary to revive sustained and sustainable growth. A substantial easing of debt burdens, increased financial flows, expanded market access for exports and a stable international economic environment were critical to the success of the efforts made by developing countries to restructure their economies, mobilize domestic human and material resources and create the infrastructure and institutional base necessary for sustained development. Furthermore, development policies should be sufficiently broad-based to benefit all population groups and should be targeted to alleviating poverty.

As part of the activities of the ongoing International Decade for Natural Disaster Reduction, the United Nations system as a whole was concentrating on ways to prevent disasters and to be prepared for them if they occurred. In view of the recent tragedy in Bangladesh, it was to be hoped that the international community would respond generously to the Secretary-General's appeal for international assistance to that stricken country.

Some of the key issues in the social sphere which had engaged international attention in the past year were addressed in the Interim report on the world social situation, which was before the Council (A/46/56-E/1991/6). In view of the institutional changes taking place in many developing countries and in the formerly centrally-planned economies, the report endeavoured to assess the effects of the new policies and institutions which had recently emerged in response to socio-economic problems. Other topics discussed in the report included the growing concern with social services and welfare issues, as well as the environment, drug abuse and disarmament. It was to be hoped that international cooperation in those areas would be enhanced.

One of the most notable features of the report was its analysis of the breadth and scope of the institutional and structural changes under way in many countries and in nearly all regions. In the formerly centrally-planned economies, a transformation of the political, economic and social systems was

(Mr. Ahmed)

being attempted. However, in a large number of developing countries as well, a strong trend towards pluralism was emerging, together with a re-evaluation of the role of the State in social and economic matters, and greater attention was being paid to the human factor in development.

Nevertheless, in many countries the new policies and institutions had not yet demonstrated their capacity to meet societal needs. In some cases, they had been hampered at the initial stage by deep structural imbalances, shortages of resources and the insufficiency or absence of the necessary experience, infrastructure and personnel.

While it was too early to make a meaningful assessment of the socio-economic impact of the institutional and structural changes, there was already sufficient evidence to suggest that a favourable international environment and the availability of adequate resources were as critical to the success of such reforms as the consistent commitment of the Governments and peoples of the countries concerned.

There was growing concern with regard to the provision of social welfare services in many countries which were undergoing socio-economic transformation. In the formerly centrally-planned economies, the main reason for such concern was uncertainty with regard to the potential social consequences of the transition to a market economy. In most of those countries, the prevailing view was that the old institutional structures responsible for providing social services should be replaced by new ones which would be more flexible and sensitive to the needs of the people.

The report likewise emphasized the growing international concern with preservation of the environment, drug abuse and the "peace dividend", in other words, the reallocation of resources from military to civilian uses. In view of the appraisal of the potential "peace dividend" which had been undertaken by some international agencies, it might be assumed that, if the resources hitherto devoted to military purposes were freed, the current level of official development assistance could be tripled. However, it appeared that the magnitude of the "peace dividend" might have been overestimated. One of the first effects of the cuts in defence expenditures in developed countries

(Mr. Ahmed)

had been a decrease in total income, with people and equipment made idle until such time as the redeployment and conversion process had been completed. Governments would have to spend large sums on retraining and resettling released personnel and redirecting research and development efforts.

With regard to the report of the Secretary-General on the work being done within the United Nations system to improve and further develop quantitative and qualitative indicators that measured accurately the social conditions and the standards of living of the world's population, particularly in developing countries (A/46/137-E/1991/40), he said that the report served to illustrate some of the linkages and complementarities that existed among the various offices of the Department of International Economic and Social Affairs. The rapid growth in the indicators field responded to the burgeoning demand of Governments and the international community for better information in areas of primary concern, such as human resources development, poverty eradication and the social costs of structural adjustment. Social indicators could make an important contribution to the efforts to measure standards of living and overall social conditions. To date, almost all efforts to develop and improve such indicators had been focused on quantitative indicators, which measured the physical and material dimensions of human well-being. The fact that hardly any work had been done on indicators relating to the human spirit and social values continued to be of concern. As pointed out in the Secretary-General's report, the United Nations system might well consider devoting more attention to developing and improving indicators on human rights, the reduction of racial, ethnic and sexual discrimination and exploitation, the promotion of meaningful social and political participation and other issues critically affecting much of mankind.

In all areas of the Department's work, the need to devote special attention to the situation of women was taken into account. As requested by the Council, the World Economic Survey had, for the past three years, included a special section on the socio-economic attainments of women. The progress made in ensuring access by women to the development process and to advances in

(Mr. Ahmed)

science and technology was examined. The forthcoming Survey would address the question of women and poverty.

On 21 June 1991, the United Nations would issue a book entitled The World's Women 1970-1990, which was the result of collaboration among many United Nations bodies concerned with promoting equality for women and their participation in development. As the Secretary-General had stated in his introduction, the book should be an invaluable tool for promoting equality and changing attitudes towards women's work, worth and responsibilities.

The PRESIDENT thanked the Under-Secretary-General for International Economic and Social Affairs for his statement, the end of which served to introduce the statement by the Director-General of the United Nations Office at Vienna, and Head of the Centre for Social Development and Humanitarian Affairs.

Miss ANSTEE (Director-General, United Nations Office at Vienna, and Head of the Centre for Social Development and Humanitarian Affairs) said that the current spring session of the Economic and Social Council was particularly important for the United Nations Office at Vienna (UNOV), since the Council would for the first time consider the recommendations and decisions of the Eighth United Nations Congress on the Prevention of Crime and the Treatment of Offenders and would also act on the recommendations of both of the principal subsidiary bodies concerned with Vienna issues, namely, the Commission on the Status of Women and the Commission for Social Development.

The two commissions and the Eighth Congress had had a very positive outcome, especially when seen against the background of events which had presented both new challenges and opportunities. In that context, it was disturbing that Member States continually demanded that the commissions should keep within existing resources and not incur additional expenditure. That gave rise to the great paradox that Member States were expecting more and favouring the Organization with new responsibilities, without comparable treatment in the matter of resources; instead of increasing, resources had sometimes actually shrunk, as in the case of UNOV.

(Miss Anstee)

The positive aspect of that "great paradox" was the attention being given at the international level to social issues - which for a long time had not been regarded as suitable for international treatment or even exposure. Now, many countries were very comfortable with the idea of aiming at or jointly elaborating international norms or guidelines and were willing to draw on experience and expertise from outside - not just financial resources - to cope with serious domestic problems. That change of approach had been brought about to a considerable extent by negative developments such as economic stagnation, retrogression or prolonged crises, which had done much to focus on the social and institutional - or human - dimensions of development. The drive towards greater economic efficiency, technological change, espousal of market-oriented approaches, greater international mobility and other positive developments had also brought new social problems and had put in focus the importance of the social component in the management of change and the achievement of economic objectives. It was widely agreed that "development" could not be called such unless economic growth was achieved with social equity and social solidarity.

Rather than a redistribution of assets, which had been tried and found wanting because of its limited capacity to increase material well-being and "social space", the concept of "levelling-up" - through special attention to enhance the capacity of low-productivity sectors, low-income segments and socially disadvantaged or vulnerable groups - had taken shape. Increasingly, there had been a move towards development strategies which encouraged processes and institutional change through the strengthening of people's consciousness and their understanding of issues which affected them, with an emphasis on the creation of conditions whereby people could undertake the necessary action to improve their condition.

That approach must now be translated into action, and UNOV was increasingly concentrating its efforts in that area. At the internal level, it had been necessary to ask more of the staff and to take advantage of the generous offers of Governments to lend staff and provide other forms of

(Miss Anstee)

support. UNOV had been actively working to overcome the limitations placed on it by a shrinking resource base.

The current session was a good opportunity for taking stock of the four years of her stewardship of UNOV. In 1987, UNOV had been made the nucleus within the Secretariat for social policy and social development and drug abuse control, with the endorsement of the General Assembly. However, in 1989 the General Assembly had turned down the Secretary-General's proposals to consolidate UNOV as the social nucleus by transferring to Vienna the social policy and reporting functions remaining in the Department of International Economic and Social Affairs, in New York, together with some modest resources; and then in 1990 the General Assembly, reflecting the concern of Member States over the seriousness of the drug problem, had set up a new and separate drug programme, outside UNOV. Four years after the new concept of UNOV had been launched, it had been de facto abandoned as a result of a series of separate decisions, without the role and functions of the Office, whose remaining structures no longer corresponded to an integrated approach to social issues, having been determined.

Institutions ought to survive only in so far as they served a purpose; and that brought her back to the "great paradox" that she had mentioned at the outset. In the face of the upsurge of concern over social and human resources development, the United Nations found itself in an increasingly weaker position to fulfil responsibilities at the very heart of its Charter: "to promote social progress and better standards of life in larger freedom", and to create conditions conducive to political stability.

That task would be difficult as long as there was no real nucleus for social issues in the United Nations. Responsibility for social issues was still split between Headquarters, in New York, and UNOV, which was left with a series of small programmes, inadequately funded, with an inadequate policy framework to "glue" them together and with further fragmentation possible. Member States could not just do nothing to face the consequences of the series of ad hoc decisions taken and simply let UNOV and the social issues remain in limbo. That was not in the interest of Member States, and in particular not

(Miss Anstee)

that of developing countries, to which operational and advisory services had been greatly increased, despite overwhelming financial constraints.

At its forty-fifth session the General Assembly had asked for a "comprehensive restructuring of United Nations entities in Vienna", but that issue had not been tackled by the Assembly at its recently concluded resumed session. Both the General Assembly and the Economic and Social Council had repeatedly called for the strengthening of UNOV, and the Secretary-General's report on the subject had anticipated some measures to increase the Office's capacity in global social policy and analysis in the budget proposals for the biennium 1992-1993. However, the straight-jacket of the zero-growth budget meant that the outlook for social issues in the United Nations remained bleak.

She asked the Secretariat to draw the attention of Governments to the problem, both structural and financial, of properly fulfilling the Organization's mandates in the social sphere. She stressed the necessity of concentrating responsibility for social issues in one place, so that the United Nations could speak with one voice. Lastly, she asked that a unified and effective structure for social questions should be established and that the role of UNOV should be well defined.

The meeting rose at 1.05 p.m.